

THE IOWA PIONEER

By THOMAS H. MACBRIDE



THE IOWA PIONEER
AND
HIS IDEALS

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY

THOMAS H. MACBRIDE

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EDUCATION DAY

OF THE

SEMI-CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

OF THE

CITY OF CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA

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The Iowa Pioneer and His Ideals

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Humanity has learned to count by centuries. The great chronometer of human story ticks centennials, and we sons and daughters of time have somehow learned to listen for the music of its mighty pendulum. Too often the deep monotone has been the roar of battle. For a thousand years the centuries have gone out in war and the new era has dawned in tumult. Only today a new energy rises in the world; the voice of the people has at length become the voice of God, and speaking by the mouth of an American president commands the world to peace. Who doubts but that for this new factor in history, our twentieth century which began to follow precedent, would still be exploding on all shores of earth in the flames of universal conflict? Such has ever been the music of the horologue of time, whose pendulum beats centuries.

Mr. Ruskin, the distinguished Englishman, would not visit America because, as is reported, he could not endure a country which had no history, which had, as he said, neither castles nor cathedrals. No doubt there may be satisfaction to some men in looking upon a lengthened past and in contemplating the remnants of some earlier age; no doubt there is inspiration in historic lore. But if Mr. Ruskin could have been here today he had been compelled to say, if he said the truth,

that for the comfort and happiness of its people Cedar Rapids had done more in fifty years than any town of equal size in all Europe had accomplished in no matter how many centuries. What need have we of that background of tyranny and wretchedness and sorrow, even though at the last culminating in the light of art and song, what need of the darkness when we may begin with light? Nature herself anticipates. She makes haste today when she would build her greatest work; she ignores the ages, only touches as in reminiscence her far, far-stretching past and rears in a few decades her masterpiece — the palace of a human soul. In the shadow of cathedrals, crowned by centuries of story, beneath the very arches of castellated ruin by the Rhine I have seen the unlettered peasant plowing with the family cow. To such a man what avail the centuries? How much of life from that old cathedral gilds his toil? upon his sorrow-dimmed vision what romantic spectacle rises, as round the castle walls in penury he stumbles during the laborious slow-grinding years of human toil? Let us rejoice that fifty years have placed here, under these skies benign, more happy, simple homes than can be found in any equal area in all the ancient world.

But as a matter of fact, the centuries punctuated by war are, after all, too long for us. Our generations are too brief. For the men that now live and act upon our streets the events of a hundred years ago are practically a thousand years away. We fail to find any living interest in times so far remote and sympathize the rather with our red neighbor of the plains who

counts only the passing moons, or winters, or seasons. A shorter grasp is ours, and even fifty years is quite enough for the compass of swift-passing sons of men. Of those into whose hands came fifty years ago, the fresh-writ charter of this town, how few today remain! Of the men who first marked these splendid avenues, how few yet follow their far-protracted lines! Only those of us who were then children in the groves of Iowa, or who then chased the shadows that moved in summer across the flower-decked plains — only such can bring you memories of Iowa's fifty years.

But I hasten to congratulate the people of this city upon their growth, their abounding life and hope, their present prosperity, upon all that makes them proud on this glad, festal day. I am permitted to speak for education, to offer you the felicitations of the schools, of the university, and I doubt not, of every school and college, of every scholar in the commonwealth. In your rejoicing this day every man of learning shares, every friend of public education has a part, every humblest teacher a personal pride; for is not your triumph, your wealth, your culture, are not your virtue, peace and order, is not this beautiful city itself spread today upon these velvet plains and hills — is not all this but the outcome of the knowledge, and the science, and the truth taught in our common schools? If the city of today is better, not larger, than the city of fifty years ago, is it not because of what learning and science, what the schools have been able to do for, and to teach mankind? We are all of us today the children of the schools and we have come up here to express our appre-

ciation of the honor and the fullness of that too little pondered fact!

It may not be too often proclaimed that thronging millions, increasing wealth, or even added commerce and power among the nations of the earth, — that these things do not of necessity make a nation great; that nation only is great, however seemingly prosperous, whose people are not only happy and contented, but are wise enough to know their own happiness, sharing in the common wealth, knowing the relative values of terrestrial things, the equity of requited toil, the pride of civil order, the courage of self-respect, the sweetness and fruitfulness of peace. Such a nation only is blessed and to such a nation only may added millions and increasing wealth be of any possible use. But these qualities go to make up national as well as personal character, and the shaping of national character has been largely committed to the schools. Whatever we are today we owe to free labor, free faith and free schools.

Now I am not here to indulge in reminiscence; nevertheless in order to make good my argument I may be permitted to mention some things which in the history of Iowa are not only forever memorable but forever worthy of memory. We are the children of the pioneers. The institutions under which we live have come to us by inheritance absolutely direct, quite as much so as in the case of streets and boundary lines. Mr. Blashfield has given us in our state capitol at Des Moines, in a painting, beautiful indeed and deservedly admired, his conception of the wagon of the pioneer. Seeds spring up behind the rolling wheels, and corn and

wheat rise ready for the harvest. None would dispute the truthfulness of that fine conception. The grains that make all Iowa green today, the very emerald of the planet, these all came first directly from the hand of our pioneer. But the wagon brought some other things which even the wit of the artist, great as that may be, has not been competent to declare. The allegorical figures that float above may offer some suggestions, but the real, the vital, the eternally vivifying, freightage of that wagon neither Mr. Blashfield nor any other gifted artist may ever fully or rightfully set forth. The men who laid the foundations of that social and civic structure which we today name Cedar Rapids, were no doubt plain men, were like the men who came fifty and sixty years ago to every part of Iowa, and the first covered wagon that so long ago came driving up along this river-threaded valley, the first wagon that stopped at even-tide beneath the bur-oaks on the greensward by the crystal river, here where now we stand today, that wagon brought with it certain principles, certain habits of thought and life which made those poor men resting there great; made them men of character; men of hope and men of power, worthy progenitors of the proud civilization that we see, and the yet prouder that shall follow, when on the lapse of another fifty years men meet again to celebrate not the semi-centennial, but the centennial of the civilization of these happy western fields.

The pioneers were men of ideals and on a day like this it is well worth our while to reflect what these ideals were. We are in danger of being so blinded by our elec-

tric lights and so deafened by the roar of our crowding commerce that the beauty of these old simple, but as I believe, eternal, ideals is likely to be forgotten. Our pioneers were men of faith, men of strong conviction; they believed profoundly in certain definite things, and they acted according to their concept of high responsibility and duty.

1. In the first place these pioneers of ours believed profoundly in themselves. No matter whence they came, from New England, from Ohio, from England, Ireland, Germany, Bohemia, they were all men of independent spirit, conscious of an ability to do for themselves, to take care of themselves, asking odds of no mortal man. Every man of them could drive his own team, make or at least mend, his own simple tools and on occasion build his own house and furnish it if necessary. The poorest of them was absolutely independent.

They were people of supreme natural confidence. Not one of them ever asked "Is life worth living?" No such miserable interrogatory was ever suggested to their nature-guided, nature-loving souls. It was worth while to hew and build; it was worth while to sow and reap and sow again; it was worth while to rear their children in all the cleanliness and simplicity of country living, teaching them the fear of God, the love of country, the reverence due to older people, the scorn of pride and slavery and oppression; it was worth while to shape towns and villages and constitutions, and institutions, and a free state in God's open field, beneath divine over-bending skies, the empire of good will. In seek-

ing a new home they new-found themselves, renewed their racial youth in perennial inspiration.

2. They were generally men of strong religious faith. Our fathers generally believed sincerely in God and in his governance in this world. His presence never departed from them. Even as the covered wagon of the immigrant moved along, dusty with the grime of travel, across these prairies and through our groves evening after evening, around the glowing camp-fire or by the light of a smoky lantern, "the priest-like father read the sacred page;" the old brown leather-covered bible was brought forth, and where only the rustling of the leaves or murmur of streams might break primeval silence, old and young bent low to hear

"How Abram was the friend of God on high;
How he who bore in heaven the second name,
Had not on earth whereon to lay his head;
How he who lone in Patmos banished,
Saw in the sun a mighty angel stand;—"

and listened to those other mighty themes that through the Christian centuries have moved the hearts of men. And when later on, these wide plains about us were everywhere dotted with the settlers' cabins, morning by morning and evening by evening, with the dawn and with the sunset, went up from pure hearts the incense of the morning and the evening sacrifice, with the music of sacred song. I have trodden the aisles of vast cathedrals and the tessellated floors of the proudest fanes ever built by men; I have heard the voice of choirs, where art and genius by all the blending of unseen harmony strive to move to lofty sentiment the human soul,

I have stood where music in pulsing waves steals from lofty arch and fretted ceiling and through sculptured screen as if to imitate the tones of the angelic hosts, but no music that ever reached my ear had power and cadence, rhythm and sweetness, like to those clear gentle tones that on a peaceful morning from a hundred open cabin windows moved in quiet measures above the flower-decked prairies of the long ago. Churches there were, too, in those old days, churches in plenty; but they were the simplest sort of churches, churches that crystallized everywhere in those same settlers' cabins. Our pioneer had read all too well "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Two or three, and especially two or three families, were enough for him, and his multitudinous churches started into being, rose and are with us to this day.

3. The pioneers of Iowa believed in education. The best building in the community whether out on the open prairie or in the little village that grew up, as Cedar Rapids, or Iowa City, or Waterloo, or any little town, about the mill, or along the stream — the best building then as now, was the school house, and in the school house day by day were gathered all the little children, in winter all the big children of the neighborhood; and betimes for spelling or singing exercise, almost the whole community. Our fathers did not perhaps know just exactly all that education could do for them or for their children; neither do we; much less could they anticipate to what perfection of organization and efficiency in fifty years their simple schools would

grow; but they believed in schools. They had heard the injunction, "take fast hold of instruction, let her not go for she is thy life!" and they tried to put the precept into general effect. The log school house with slab benches constituted the physical plant in evidence; instruction in the arts of reading, writing and arithmetic, went steadily along, with such accompanying lessons in history and love of country, as made a proud patriot of every son and daughter of the prairie.

Possibly, by the figure bearing an open book, Blashfield in his painting yonder at Des Moines, would indicate the onward sweep of learning. Learning, too, came to Iowa and occupied these valleys. No sooner was the log school house well established than the college walls began to rise. High schools there were none, but the college and the academy had a place in every center of settlement and these are with us in numbers to this day. Who shall estimate the service of these institutions built in nearly every community in Iowa by the enthusiasm, the self-sacrifice, the toil, yea by the very labor of the hands of the pioneers? To how many men, now active in field and court and state, have these small institutions of higher learning been as wells of water to the thirsty soul, the fountains of an inspiration that has made Iowa a land of hope and light. Who prizes not the colleges of Iowa knows not the history nor the spirit of this commonwealth, nor has he ever sought out the hiding places of its power. Our fathers were lovers of learning; not learning in its vastness, but learning in its spirit, its sweetness, its beauty and its power; for we must know that Learning her-

self, in those old days, was still a frugal dame, and yet confined her prim meanderings to the limits of a four years' course; and never thought to daze the aspiring youth with sudden, overwhelming perspective of all her intricate highways and byways, in courses graduate, undergraduate, far extended, where the despairing candidate might consume the waking hours of all his three-score years and ten and, if by reason of strength he reached four score years, would still find himself in learning's name confronted by labor, sorrow and vexation of spirit, with the accumulated wisdom of mankind still untraversed. Modern learning is vast, and wondrous, but after all pure learning as loved by the scholars of the ages is still compassable and simple.

Our teachers, too, in their elder day, were simple-minded men and women. They were many of them graduates of Harvard and Princeton and Yale, and of all the old-fashioned colleges of the east — normal schools there were none —, and yet they were content if the boys could read the Spectator, the Rambler, Macaulay, Shakespeare and the Bible; satisfied if the youthful soul could master the triple division of Gaul, the sorrows of Cataline — not of Werther —; they would have none of him; could pass the *pons asinorum* in safety, and follow at some gentle distance at least, the labyrinthine, moral arguments of good old Bishop Butler. Now and then for variety we heard Demosthenes contending for the crown or denouncing Philip of Macedon, or even touched the infinite humanity of the tale of Troy divine. But that was all; the most favored learned nothing of anything else; but, from such col-

leges men went forth, as John Milton says, to perform if they could and as they might, "Justly, skilfully and magnanimously, all the duties, both public and private, of peace and of war." From schools like this a generation ago, the boys went forth to serve the republic, to guide its armies, to govern its senates, to fill its fields, to weave its history in peaceful, righteous living, with no taint of graft or selfishness or greed; they were the children of the pioneers!

Out of these simple institutions of fifty years ago have come the majestic system of our free schools of today, crowned with state college and university, offering to every youth in Iowa the whole scope of human intellectual effort. I am not here to praise the past. I shall never say the former days were better than these; I do not believe it. It is true that in the dim light of distance all traces of hardness and roughness disappear. We remember in this transient world, goodness only; the bad is speedily forgotten. Therefore I will say that while in our educational effort we have far outrun the ideas of the fathers, we have not surpassed, and we never shall transcend their high ideals. Their strength was in the simple common schools; our pride is in our higher schools. They had reason for their pride and so have we. But in this we are today in peril. The common schools, the rural schools are at the bottom, and if they fail us, the whole superstructure is in vain. Were I a Carnegie, I should build no library, stone monument to my princely wealth, I should endow no university, to conserve the learning of the ages, valuable as both these things may be. I should endow the

common schools. I would see to it that every common school on prairie hill-top, or by the edge of the wood, or in the forgotten village was the best in form, in appointment, in teaching service, that the wisdom of men can suggest. I would equip these schools with the best trained, most winning and cultured teachers in the world, for here and here always the millions of the republic are trained for high privilege and destiny. The stream rises not higher than its fountains. You may catch up some hundreds in your high schools, but millions go on down the valley and shall more and more, as the decades pass, determine the destinies of humanity in this new world. I lift my voice this day in behalf of the rural schools; you shall not neglect these, if the republic is to live. The schools and not the courts of naturalization are the gateways to citizenship. Our immigration reaches millions; we are playing a hitherto unheard of, a tremendous game, and some do not believe in it; I do. Men seek the republic; let them come, but I appeal to every man who does come, to every Englishman, to every Italian, to every Greek, whatever else he may be able or unable to do for his children, not to shut them from the schools; not, as he prizes their freedom, not, as he loves his own, not, as he values the institutions that here welcome him and them; the schools alone are set to make us a homogeneous people, to make and keep us one.

Finally, fellow citizens, just so surely as effect follows cause, just so sure are the present fortunate conditions of this country the result and outcome of the forces, moral, social and intellectual forces set in mo-

tion by the men and women of fifty years ago. Our great wealth and abundance today of all good things, our marble, our silver, our shine and splendor on every hand, all this has really little to do with our comfort and joy as a progressive and independent people; no more than the flowing waters, the ample forest, the fertile soils, that made up the visible wealth of fifty years ago. Was it not said 2000 years ago, "The life is more than meat, and the body than raiment?" Our protecting houses, however fine, are but greater overcoats which save us from the weather. We can conceive of a life in which such things may serve us not at all, and every wisest man knows how cheap at times all earthly possessions may become. Many a man in presence of all our modern splendor, many a man whom men have envied, too, has looked back in fondest memory to a far-away, canvass-covered wagon, in which nestled, amid simple household furnishing, half a dozen brown-faced children then his total wealth, and his eyes have been dim with tears!

Mr. Blashfield's wagon has seven bows; the expert will tell him it should have but five; but the artist meant it should be roomy; it carried much. Like the Mayflower, the covered wagon carried empire, and the tossing grasses of the prairie were like crested waves. Its journey has ended; it courses the plains no more. Migration follows a line of steel, and the pioneer may move in a palace car, but the old wagon should not be forgotten; its content was and shall be precious to men. Gone is the old ox-yoke with its bows, gone the sod house and the cabin, gone the old drop-leaf table

and the split bottom chair, gone much if not all that made up the hardship of fifty years ago, but the ideals of that day perish not; nor time nor any decay can touch them; they are forever!

And when fifty years from now our children shall gather again as we do now, to mark in pride, and as we hope, in peace and gladness, the first century of this city's fame and story, let them say as we do now:—

"No praises of the past are hers
No pains by hallowing time caressed,
No broken arch that ministers
To Time's sad instinct in the breast:

She builds not on the ground but in the mind
Her open-hearted palaces—

Her march the plump mow marks, the sleepless wheel;
The golden sheaf, the self-swayed common weal;
The happy homesteads hid in orchard trees,—

What architect hath bettered these?
With softened eye the western traveller sees
A thousand miles of neighbors side by side;
Holding by toil-won titles, fresh from God,
The land no serf or seigneur ever trod."



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